

**Mutual vulnerability:
an ethic of clinical practice
(2016)**

Introduction by Jessica Benjamin

It seems impossible to begin a commentary on this wonderful chapter without first expressing my continual amazement at the capaciousness of Lew's mind. While unmistakably infused with Lew's unique interests and perspectives, it also is a testimony to his ability to recognize and acknowledge the most important and diverse contributions of others—indeed, his recognition of the other.

The title of the chapter is overly modest, belying its scope. The chapter speaks not only to a clinical ethic, a position that grounds our practice, but also to a pragmatic that grounds all our work in this field by embracing the vital standpoint of accepting our vulnerability. And as essential as that acceptance of vulnerability is for our clinical work, Lew shows us how that embrace is essential to our broadest moral, social, philosophical, and human concerns. Furthermore, by identifying the tragic consequences within the organizing principles of classical analysis, which required the analyst's dissociative off-loading of vulnerability, this perspective also provides a trenchant critique of objectivism. The essay therefore also expresses an epistemological position, the need to ground psychoanalysis not in the subject-object knowledge of Western tradition but an intersubjective view that includes a critical understanding of the binary oppositions that led to impasses within that tradition. And that critique, in turn, is interwoven with the understanding of the historical and social conditions of patriarchy, anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, and colonialism that gave rise to the repudiation of vulnerability. All of these intersecting points—the ethical, the clinical-pragmatic, the epistemological, and the social—are

represented in the overarching synthesis Lew develops here. A tour de force.

Lew begins by proposing a deep psychoanalytic explanation for Freud's tragic flaw: the effects of patriarchy and anti-Semitism on his mind. Taking up Gilman's analysis of how anti-Semitic tropes of feminizing Jews constructs an atmosphere of racialized, sexualized humiliation refracted in Freud's own awareness of such issues as bisexuality, the Oedipus, and the ultimate bedrock of repudiating femininity. That is, he contends that psychoanalysis was founded in the midst of collective trauma that shaped both an acute awareness of vulnerability to suffering and also a disposition to dissociate and project that vulnerability.

Lew braids together the repudiation of femininity, linked to the idea of masculine objectivity, with the devaluing of dependency and relationality associated with "contaminating effeminate and primitive" characteristics. These projected aspects, he argued, had to be purged from psychoanalysis as a science, which would then be preserved as a powerful tool and legitimate instrument of the master. Pursuing the consequences of this move toward control, Lew shows how in America this masculinist position employed the rhetorical strategy of opposing psychoanalysis to a devalued opposite: psychotherapy, in which by contrast to the analyst a clinician is neither neutral nor disengaged.

Thus Lew builds on his earlier critique of analytic neutrality and defense of mutuality in *A Meeting of Minds*, where he integrated feminism with the clinical project of relational analysis, embracing the analyst's subjectivity. He thus added the clinical dimension to my analysis of how the splitting of gender and the denial of the mother's subjectivity bar the way to intersubjective recognition.

In this piece, Lew explicates further why gender splitting cannot simply be transcended by a simple reversal in favor of revaluing dependency and relationality, vulnerability and empathy with suffering. To avoid falling back into the binary, it is also necessary to maintain the value of differentiation, individuation, and separation altogether. In a particularly elegant movement, Lew offers as an example of how tension can be maintained Bion's idea of the caesura, employing but also transcending the revaluing stance toward the maternal. Bion's development of Freud's idea that the caesura of birth contains a

primal continuity with prenatal life turns on the proposal that we are linked and separated in the same place. Union and differentiation are not opposed.

However, that metaphor itself does not answer or seamlessly tie up our questions, especially about the clinical dimension. In his earlier work, Lew famously and crucially cautioned that mutuality does not cancel out the analyst's asymmetrical responsibility. Thinking this through again, Lew seeks to show the re-owning of vulnerability, revaluing and redeeming all that was consigned to the primitive and feminine, would collapse without some effort to attain a third position and hold the tension of opposites.

The direction he takes here pushes more deeply into the implications of using the idea of the Third. The necessity of this Third, an idea which Lew and I worked on together (see Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004), is fleshed out in terms of Lew's spiritual beliefs and influences, culminating with his image of tearful God who suffers for us. He returns again to the inspiration behind the Third, its religious aspects in the mystical traditions that unite Christianity and Judaism.

In his discussion of the Third, Lew brings together the moving parts of relational analysis as developed by a whole cohort of thinkers, acknowledging the whole orchestra. He reviews how the moral Third is established as the analyst works through rupture and repair, acknowledges without submitting, surrenders, and so creates mental space for recognizing the different voices within. Multiple self-states emerge from the trap of doer and done to. The analyst shows him- or herself to be permeable, penetrable, reachable—again refiguring the association of femininity with vulnerability in the Freudian psychosexual lexicon. In this way, Lew recursively ties all his themes.

Finally, then, Lew brings back Ferenczi, communing and mingling his tears with his patient, moved by empathy and knowledge of his own suffering. Without giving up our separate responsibility, he declares us capable of holding this mutuality. The power of his faith in mutual recognition, that we can always work toward re-establishing connection and lawfulness after breakdowns, is affirmed, and we are left inspired and a little breathless at how far we have come in such a short time. I wish Lew had tarried much longer with us, but his vision of our journey will remain with us and in that way he is still by our side—both sides.